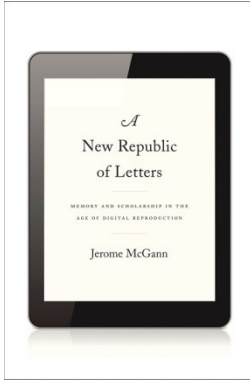


## On McGann's "philological conscience"

MATHEUS DE BRITO

CLP | University of Coimbra



Jerome McGann, *A New Republic of Letters: Memory and Scholarship in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014, 238 pp. ISBN: 978-0-674-72869-1

**R***espublica literaria* was a symbol of a secular knowledge network and a general statement for humanistic endeavor. “Modest, lucid, catholic” (207), as McGann describes it, the chronotope of “Republic of Letters” has a twofold relation to his work. First, it epitomizes his concerns with literary history. Second, it also signals what is to be done under the *digital condition*, namely, how traditionally paper-based scholarship could function within the digital archive. *A New Republic of Letters: Memory and Scholarship in the Age of Digital Reproduction* (2014) draws its name from that imagined community of the Enlightenment Era.

McGann begins his book by revealing his concerns about method. Why Philology? Erstwhile taken as an *institutus* for Humanities, such as implied in Böckh’s definition of it as “the knowledge of the known,” Philology was gradually dismissed under the sign of post-war literary theory. It now means a kind of art that yields ready-to-go products such as established texts and scholarly editions. Book knowledge, attention to fragments from the past, “the object-oriented and media approach to the study of history and culture” (3), have been altogether associated with *dry-as-dust* intellectuals “in their monkish cells” (20) when contrasted with more current forms of scholarship. These forms pursue the path of *Wortphilologie*, focusing on *words* instead of *things*. McGann calls on material Philology not to be “applied” but to provide a horizon in which the Humanities can cope with the immaterial semblance of digital culture—one in which contemporary culture can mirror itself.

“Philology in a New Key”, an idea that accrued meaning from previous writings, amounts to a matter of *method*, not *theory*. Some three decades ago, McGann stated that if the Humanities faced a crisis, it did not concern propositions on literary artifacts but the very ways through which they are studied and taught, as well as our research programs and institutional policies. Thus, if at first it might seem that bibliographical knowledge is subsidiary to the multifarious enterprise known as Digital Humanities, McGann’s point is that this “knowledge of the known” has a priority on the subject matter, hence the technical, purely informatics dimension being a way of making it *new*. In short, one should focus on the *humanities* rather than on the *digital*, that is, seeing from the “inner standing point” of what is being retooled, instead of gazing at the retooling itself.

Today scholars would assume theory as a primary discussion method seeming to be contingent and dependent on fundamental assertions regarding literature. According to McGann, nonetheless, the intertwinement of method and function foregrounds axiology as constitutive of the humanistic task, thus bestowing on theory a somewhat residual status. From its inception, he states, “[s]cholarship and interpretation [...] are procedures that *do something about something*” (79). It might not seem that obvious, for Humanities are not modelled after the Natural Sciences, and, thus, no abstract, conceptual explanation should burden its social functions. Whereas scientific knowledge can, for the sake of rigor and accuracy, suspend its immediate social commitment, any attempt at a non-socially-oriented human knowledge is at best a performative contradiction: there is no understanding of the human without the human subject. Much of text-meaning-based theory eludes this performative dimension and mobilizes its object without an awareness of its own protocols, especially the conditions that shape the reception of a work. These theories produce their own blindness by selecting what is to be seen in their *discourse field*—then, as the lesson goes, another theory comes to fill the precedent’s gaps, and so on. One may employ such and such theory to “read” a text, but a question remains obfuscated by the idea that interpretive performance is purely constative: what is one *doing* to a *thing*?

The Document, overriding barthesian *diktat* “from work to text”, is the central category addressed here. Documents, just as Barthes’ *oeuvres*, have volume and occupy spaces; they are *things*; but, whereas the authority of *oeuvres* seemed pragmatically bestowed, the authority of documents lies in their material dimension. Materiality itself comprises institutional history and further textual, linguistic features, sometimes even inscribing the later cognitive acts that enact all of them—underlines, *marginalia*, supra-segmental inflections during recitation. To better understand this materialistic, *sachphilologisch* shift, it might do well to contrast interpretive *exposition* and *commentary*: if traditional hermeneutics typically conceives its objects as *intentional objects*, which may be “comprehended” and further “explained”, *annotating* and *glossing* refrain from collapsing these processes, for real objects are not word-soluble. So, contem-

porary literary studies could take *Sachphilologie* (*Sach*, stuff, thing) as a counterwager: at a theoretical level, Documents are only resistant to semantics: they cannot be burned after being read. Their estranged register hinders any sort of remembrance through inquiry, rather provoking a *Durcharbeitung* (in the Freudian sense, via Lyotard), a "working-through" of their textual condition. In McGann's work, this concerns *deformance* as a performance that is self-aware of its limitations and heuristic capabilities. To the point: "[b]esides realizing, perhaps, what we didn't know we knew, we are also led into imaginations of what we hadn't known at all" (87). McGann is not simply addressing digital scholarship: his return to Philology is also a criticism of the forgetfulness that permeates interpretive practices.

In many ways, Digital Humanists were brought up amidst such narrow conceptions—especially about "the text itself". If one takes *text* as a purely linguistic, mental entity, hence being immaterial and infinitely utterable, it ensues that there is a way of "optimally" feeding it into the machine, translating it into a sequence of binary digits. But if such an endeavor stems from a misguided conception, digitization is bound to reproduce this "blindness" without ever being able to turn its further insights into something other than the sheer reduction with which it has begun. This understanding impoverishes both paper and digital media, since it fails to grasp their *specifics* by laying emphasis on an all-in-one cognition that would render them equal. Thus McGann urges us to engage in a "disciplined philological study of literary and cultural works" (112) as a prerequisite to dispel misconceptions.

There are, McGann argues, while discussing the Text Encoding Initiative, textual and documentary features not only embedded with history but also with their own dynamics, which are not reproducible by the state-of-art digital technologies. Just as the 1990s advocates of an *über-alles*-digitality were right in insisting on the non-paper-translatable qualities of code, it happens that bookspaces have their non-quantifiable qualities, such as three-dimensional coding systems, handling algorithms and textual markup (design, paratexts, protocols of divisioning), some of which will not fit into digital markup schemes (91). For "text" is an autopoietic *discourse field*, whose smaller structures operate in co-dependence and cannot be atomized except procedurally, it resists the technical imperative to avoid ambiguity and overlapping markup. This is why encoding efforts such as *TEP*s seem restricted to serving "certain, very specific, purposes" (96) of "organizing our received humanities materials as (...) information depositories" (107-108). This restriction falls behind larger humanistic interests, since it misses the *n*-dimensionality of artifacts. If there is no way of digitizing—nor retransmitting (168)—without suffering a kind of loss, there are, however, *n*-ways of "optimizing" this loss, that is, of reducing restrictions by bringing forth what would be different to what one knows, through *imagination*. This concerns developing scholarly tools capable of dealing with unstable conditions, whether these tools be digital or not. McGann's *dementional* method of *patacriticism*—i.e., a

reiterative reading through successive marks on textual dimensions—is an analogical-conceptual example of such tools. The point is that, abiding by the “uncertainty principle”, the digital must assimilate contingency in order to work through the *human* in the Humanities.

As for the third part, it mostly addresses institutional and academic problems that proliferate within the gap between the philologue and the digeratus. The first of his final three chapters focuses upon this divide, increased by wrong policies (or their absence) on digital scholarship. Taking in consideration his own experience in editing, McGann builds examples on why and how to cope with the historical conditions of production and transmission of literary works, and prescribes a *scholarship of indeterminacy* as a way of making the editorial environment able to meet the demand of apprehending the social dimension of texts. Some access to a “comprehensive view of the discourse field” (165) is his aim for the final couple of chapters, in which he also exemplifies, by applying and explaining them, some key principles and ideas for a Philology in a New Key.

McGann’s book is not so much a diagnosis as a proposal. The title conceals a “towards”, “*Towards a New Republic of Letters*”. Concerning the digitization of documents and electronic editing, the best one can hope for nowadays is to understand precisely, accurately describe and find a way of recoding (98) those dynamic features in the new environment – lest the Digital fall outside the inner standing point of Humanities. But could not one argue the same for every scholarly enterprise, even if not related to digital matters? For, “[a]fter we digitize the books, the books themselves remain. Or (...) should” (132). Humanistic scholarship can not and must not go on without an awareness of things past.

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